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ABSTRACT

This study is a qualitative exploration of the amount of talk (also known as linguistic space) used by girls as opposed to boys in a grade 2 English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classroom in British Columbia. The focus of this study is the amount of language generated in a classroom lesson-time talk based on gender. Data was collected through videotaped observations, which were then transcribed, timed, and analyzed for conversational opportunities and patterns. The findings revealed that femaleness affects participation in classroom lessons and, by extension, affects language learning opportunities. This particular task of linguistic space in the girls' experience revealed that girls speak only for a fraction of the time. Their silence appeared heavily influenced by the teacher's response to student concerns. This study provides an empirical basis for the conclusion that gender is a prime variable in the ESL classroom. Learning happens through talk, and so efforts should be made to make teachers aware of the disproportionately small share of linguistic space girls claim and ways to increase their participation explored. (Contains 51 references.) (KFT)

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Speaking Silence?:

A Study of Linguistic Space and Girls in an ESL Classroom

By

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This study is a qualitative exploration of the amount of talk (also known as linguistic space) used by girls as opposed to boys in a grade two ESL classroom located in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. The focus was the amount of language generated in classroom lesson-time talk based on gender. Data was collected through videotape observations, which were then transcribed, timed, and analyzed for conversational opportunities. The findings revealed that femaleness impacts participation in classroom lessons and, by extension, impacts language learning opportunities. The particular lack of linguistic space in the girls' experience revealed that girls speak for only a fraction of the time. Their silence appeared heavily influenced by the teacher's response to student comments. The article concludes with a discussion on gender as a prime linguistic variable in ESL.

Introduction

In the field of second language acquisition, much emphasis has been on which or how variables (such as age, race, social class, ethnicity or gender, among a host of others) may have influence on language use. The intent of this study is to examine gender within an ESL experience. The past twenty-five years or so have presented educators with a wealth of research on what happens to girls in schools but only some female ESL students are benefiting from this research

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(Sunderland, 1994, 1995, 1998; Yepez, 1994; Willett, 1996; Vandrick, 1999a, 1999b). There is a compelling need to bring feminist pedagogical research to ESL students and classrooms. In this study, the amount of talk in an ESL classroom is measured and discussed, settling largely on the lack of linguistic space of girls in this context.

If we consider the tremendous amount of talk that children encounter on a daily basis and the ways in which talk may be at times antagonistic to or encouraging of their participation, then an analysis of classroom talk is relevant to ESL research. This classroom is located in one of the few independent schools operating in British Columbia which enroll children of a particular cultural and linguistic heritage; in this case: Punjabi Sikh. While heritage instruction has been long supported, Canada has very little research experience with culturally-specific ESL schools (e.g. UNESCO, 1953; Modiano, 1967; Skutnabb-Kangas & Toukomaa, 1979; Rosier & Holm, 1980; et al. cited in Toohey, 1996). As such, rigorous educational research that seeks to explore and analyze the actual experiences within such ESL classrooms contribute to a needed understanding on the part of ESL educators, concerning what language experiences are occurring and how language lessons "do gender" (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Thorne, 1993).

Background

Much work, largely anthropological and/or linguistic, has investigated speech communities by identifying certain linguistic forms as restricted or adjusted in use based on gender (Cameron, 1995; Davies, 1993; Delamont, 1990; Gupta and Umar, 1994; Oxford, 1994). Western feminists from a variety of disciplines have proposed that a particular form of female language exists, though some disagree and criticize such a view as possibly destructive or redundant in the larger

gender debate of differences (Cameron, 1990). Attention has been paid to gender and language concerning conversational practice or patterns, discourse among same-sex groups and in public talk, as well as to theoretical discussions debating language differences concerning power and dominance (Coates, 1998). There is also a current fascination in education with masculinity and achievement. The "underachievement of boys" (Connell, 1996; Davies, 1999) has been seen as a result of girls' achievement levels overtaking boys in some subjects. As a result, there has been less focus on girls in classrooms; it was researchers working predominantly in the 1970s and 1980s who investigated the disadvantage of girls in classrooms (Clarricoates, 1978; Mahony, 1985; Spender and Sarah, 1980). Their work articulated the marginalization of girls in education and, though such work was convincing, it became less engaging as the concern for the underachievement of boys gained momentum in the 1990s (Cornell, 1996; Yates, 1997). Davies (1999) discussed this shift in educational research as a response to a "moral panic" over white middle class boys becoming the new marginalized, the new "deprived" (p. 39). Davies suggests that it may currently be boys and not girls who are "losing out" because of competitive male speech patterns.

In many ways, then, it is from a growing concern for boys' underachievement in mainstream education that this ESL study on gender emerges. If the feminist research of the 1970s and 1980s has, in effect, done its job in bringing girls out from the margins of academic life, then why are the girls in this classroom speaking for less than 2% of the time? If feminism has impacted education to the point of over-emphasizing female participation at the expense of boys' achievement, then why is there such a discrepancy of participation in this classroom?

However, some research is still suggesting that girls do not receive equal attention from teachers nor adequate opportunities to speak in classrooms (including Gilligan, 1992; Orenstein, 1994; and Sadker and Sadker, 1994). Such concerns need to be explored in ESL settings. Willett (1996) asks, "Why has the TESOL profession taken so long to examine gender? Whose stories are being told in our research?" (p. 344). Vandrick (1999b) adds to this, "Now we need to find out which research results apply to ESL students and classrooms"(p. 16).

As a result of a gap in educational research connecting gender as a factor in ESL, the intention of this study is to turn some attention to the issue of gender in the second language classroom. Mahony (1985) sees gender in classrooms as settling largely on teacher attention as indicative of teacher attitudes: that boys are often seen as the privileged learners and that this is evidenced in the way they monopolize teacher attention. For every two boys to ask questions there was one girl in Mahony's study; three boys to one girl received praise and encouragement. However, the data from this ESL classroom indicates even a larger discrepancy.

Female students often also receive messages that "girls must be more refined" and it seems reasonable to suggest their often silent participation is a deliberate and even reasonable response to being instructed into such silence (Stanworth, 1981). One of the more disturbing pieces of classroom research is found in the early work of Clarricoates (1978) where she resolved, quite starkly, that "teachers like teaching boys". Spender (1980) explained further this sentiment on the part of teachers,

> When boys ask the right questions, it shows that they are bright; when girls ask them it shows they know what is expected of them. . . When classroom management is the over-riding concern of teachers—and there are many who contend that control is the major educational objective in the classroom—the passivity of girls can be seen as a desirable feature (p. 152).

Ultimately, then, there can be an implicit message that girls do not count. Because research has indicated that it is boys who talk more, interrupt more, and exert more control over talk, (Zimmerman and West, 1975), in contrast, then girls tend to listen more and are more supportive when they do talk. Schools and classrooms are pervasive language environments and so students are dealing with language most of the time. The classroom dialogue between teachers and their students is, in many ways, the entire educational process. With the growth in importance of student-centred learning, classroom talk is increasingly central to the learning process. If girls are not given equal access to talk, this must make an impact on their learning. For Swann & Stubbs (1992) language is a form of social practice and so the way language is used in classrooms reflects and even prepares students for gender inequalities in language in society at large. If we want to know how ESL girls are coping in their classrooms, it seems obvious to observe their language use and/or their silence.

The inequality of talk in classrooms is not an incidental feature of female speech (that "girls are like that") but often a result of complex social processes which have propelled the imbalance. Such inequalities may appear evident in ESL classrooms as well. In the rapid exchange in classroom discussions of teacher-student talk, it is often the first student to respond (raising hand

or making eye contact) who receives the attention of the class and this student is usually a male (Swann, 1992). By engaging in such forms of interaction, teachers are not only distancing those less competitive but giving those who already excel in claiming the floor yet further opportunities to speak.

The particular Punjabi Sikh school presents an exciting and important case for educational research concerning possibilities for language acquisition because of the Punjabi Sikh community's growing population in British Columbia. The use of a Punjabi Sikh school allows for the variable of ethnicity to recede because there is less possibility that a conflict of "cultural" values that may exist in a mainstream classroom setting exists here to the same extent. In other words, because all the students are of the same ethnic heritage, attention can be better paid to gender as a linguistic variable for the purposes of this study's focus. The possibility that gender may limit or silence some students from certain educational experience contributes to the discussion of results. In this regard, this study also hopes to interrupt the positioning of femaleness in ESL settings through this examination of linguistic space. How are these ESL girls experiencing their language classroom? This study offers some response.

The Study

Research Questions

The central aim of the study was to examine gendered patterns of "linguistic space", in a female ESL experience. It was also the intention to examine the nature of classroom talk where the pupils are all of a similar ancestry (all similarly ESL), where the language of instruction was English, and to place the notion of gendered use of linguistic space within such a context.

Context and Methodology

The focus here is on the grade two experiences of one ESL classroom through over forty hours of classroom observation. The data was collected on a weekly basis beginning in September 1998 and concluding in June 1999. The amount of data spanned ten full months in the life of this classroom. The class had twenty students: eleven boys, nine girls. The teacher was not of Punjabi ancestry. She was a Canadian-trained teacher with nine years of ESL experience.

The videotaped data was transcribed and then colour-coded to reveal the amount of linguistic space used by the participants in this classroom. Various segments of literacy lesson times were isolated and analyzed in a stratified random sample (similar lessons of full group discussions were selected and then monthly samples chosen from these similar situations). Ten segments were pulled from the transcripts and the words of teacher-talk/student-talk were counted and measured for percentages of linguistic space. Within student-talk, both the amount of boy-talk and girl-talk were measured by counting actual words to reveal the linguistic participation of girls was shared in these classroom moments. Following from such analysis, the types of speech acts were documented to gain a sense of linguistic content. The ten segments were deliberately screened for similar-type classroom moments (as in all are teacher-led lessons or "group" discussions).

Findings

The Linguistic Space

What stood out immediately when viewing the transcripts was the incredible amount of time the teacher speaks. Such a teacher-dominated room is not shocking; most teachers out-talk their students. However, the overwhelming and consistent amount of teacher talk in this study is hard to ignore or dismiss as what might be expected in a language learning classroom, presumably a classroom particularly concerned with the production and development of speech. In each of the ten segments of teacher-led classroom time used for measurement of linguistic space, the teacher uses 80%, on average, of the linguistic space.

In the analysis, I measured the amount of talk in ten segments of full-class lesson time, each of five minutes. A breakdown of word production is provided here:

LINGUISTIC SPACE: BREAKDOWN BY WORD COUNT

T: TEACHER S: ALL STUDENTS
B: BOYS G: GIRLS

SEGMENT 1 – 637 WORDS TOTAL

T:	**497 WORDS**	**78%**		
S:	**140 WORDS**	**22%**		
B:	125 WORDS	19.6%	7.8 WORD AVERAGE	16 TIMES
G:	15 WORDS	2.4%	5.0 WORD AVERAGE	3 TIMES

SEGMENT 2 – 838 WORDS TOTAL

T:	**792 WORDS**	**95%**		
S:	**46 WORDS**	**5%**		
B:	46 WORDS	5%	6.6 WORD AVERAGE	7 TIMES
G:	-	-	-	-

SEGMENT 3 – 745 WORDS TOTAL

T:	**691 WORDS**	**93%**
S:	**54 WORDS**	**7%**

B:	40 WORDS	5%	4 WORD AVERAGE	10 TIMES
G:	14 WORDS	2%	4.7 WORD AVERAGE	3 TIMES

SEGMENT 4 – 600 WORDS TOTAL

T:	**530 WORDS**	**88%**		
S:	**70 WORDS**	**12%**		
B:	67 WORDS	11%	3.9 WORD AVERAGE	17 TIMES
G:	4 WORDS	1%	4 WORD AVERAGE	1 TIME

SEGMENT 5 – 662 WORDS TOTAL

T:	**516 WORDS**	**78%**		
S:	**146 WORDS**	**22%**		
B:	124 WORDS	19%	9.5 WORD AVERAGE	13 TIMES
G:	22 WORDS	3%	5.5 WORD AVERAGE	4 TIMES

SEGMENT 6 – 778 WORDS TOTAL

T:	**756 WORDS**	**97%**		
S:	**22 WORDS**	**3%**		
B:	22 WORDS	3%	2.2 WORD AVERAGE	10 TIMES
G:	-	-	-	-

SEGMENT 7 – 460 WORDS TOTAL

T:	**389 WORDS**	**85%**		
S:	**71 WORDS**	**15%**		
B:	62 WORDS	13%	2.4 WORD AVERAGE	26 TIMES
G:	9 WORDS	2%	1.5 WORD AVERAGE	6 TIMES

SEGMENT 8 – 834 WORDS TOTAL

T:	**737 WORDS**	**88%**		
S:	**97 WORDS**	**11%**		
B:	87 WORDS	10%	5 WORD AVERAGE	17 TIMES
G:	10 WORDS	1%	10 WORD AVERAGE	1 TIME

SEGMENT 9 – 461 WORDS TOTAL

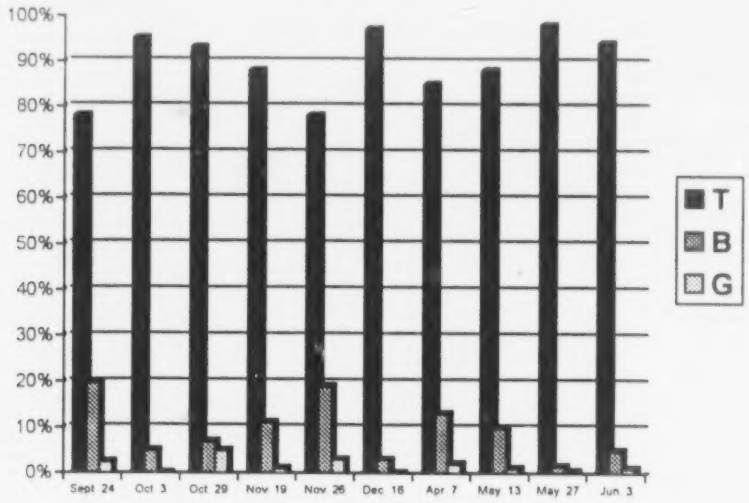
T:	**452 WORDS**	**98%**		
S:	**9 WORDS**	**2%**		
B:	7 WORDS	1.5%	1.16 WORD AVERAGE	6 TIMES
G:	2 WORDS	0.5%	1 WORD AVERAGE	2 TIMES

SEGMENT 10 – 559 WORDS TOTAL

T:	**526 WORDS**	**94%**		
S:	**33 WORDS**	**6%**		
B:	28 WORDS	5%	4 WORD AVERAGE	7 TIMES
G:	5 WORDS	1%	2.5 WORD AVERAGE	2 TIMES

The results of these measurements are further demonstrated in chart form:

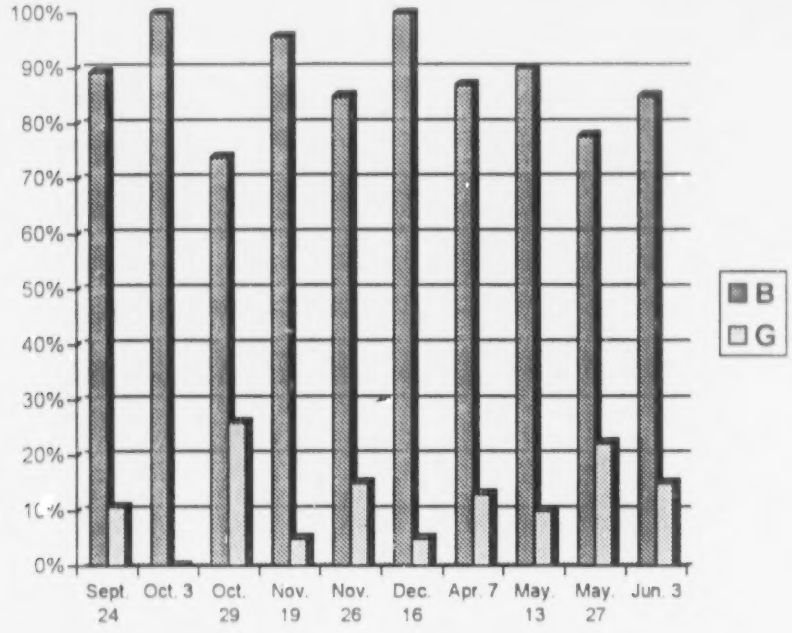
CHART 1: LINGUISTIC SPACE OF THE CLASSROOM



T: TEACHER
B: BOYS
G: GIRLS

After eliminating the teacher from the analysis, it becomes clear how much of a difference gender makes in linguistic space in this classroom. Chart 2 uses the same data but only puts forward the boys' and girls' use of linguistic space.

CHART 2: THE GENDERED LINGUISTIC SPACE OF STUDENTS



B: BOYS
G: GIRLS

As evidenced in these glimpses at classroom moments and demonstrated in the two charts outlining the measurements, several findings come to light. On average, the teacher speaks for 89.4% of the time (ranging from 78% to 97%). Her students are left, on average, with 10.5% of the remaining talk (ranging from 2% to 22%). Of this, boys speak for most of the time (88.3%). Girls speak for only 11.7% of the time. Girls speak merely 1.29% of the total discussion time (ranging from 0% to only 3%). The boys, then, are speaking nine times as much, a 9:1 ratio of linguistic space in the favour of boys.

Of the students' speech acts, 9.5 words are spoken at one time, and only the boys have such a length of duration of speech. Girls only reach an average length of a 5.5 word response, though

one girl says a full ten words at one time. As such, it is clear that the linguistic production on the part of all the children is minimal, but the girls in particular are almost non-existent in the classroom discussions. The boys speak more often than the girls and say more when they do.

Classroom Talk

In light of these findings, it may be reasonable to suggest that it is the ESL teacher who is navigating gender through class discussions to result in such a different experience for girls from that of the boys. Of significance, then, is the type of speech acts performed in each classroom-discussion segment. The speech acts themselves are accounted for here. The first part of Chart 3 documents the teacher's speech acts; the second part documents the students' speech acts. (Note that the figures represent actual occurrences rather than percentages).

CHART 3: TEACHER SPEECH ACTS AND STUDENT SPEECH ACTS

1. TEACHER SPEECH ACTS:

SPEECH ACT	TO THE CLASS	TO A BOY	TO A GIRL	TOTAL
Question	67	11	1	79
Repetition of a student's comment	10	44	5	59
Explanation	32	1		33
Negative response to a question	7	20	4	31
Instruction/guidance	28			28
Positive response	5	14	5	24
Direct order	1	10	2	13
Ignoring student's comment		10	2	12
Criticism		8	2	10

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Praise/reinforcement	1	3		4
General comment	3			3
Story-telling	2			2

2. STUDENT SPEECH ACTS

SPEECH ACT	GROUP	BOYS	GIRLS	TOTAL
Response to a question	15	57	8	80
Uninitiated comment		21	3	24
Question to teacher		1	1	2
Story-telling		1		1

As evidenced in Chart 3, the most often used speech act by the teacher was questioning (79 occurrences—see shaded area of first table). She generally directed her questions to the class as a whole (67 times), then specifically to the boys (11 times) and only once directly to a girl. She often repeated a student's comment as recognition of their contribution (59 times). But, this was most often directed to a boy (44 times) while only a few times to a girl (5 times), again, almost a 9:1 ratio of boys to girls.

The teacher-question-response-evaluation pattern is not a surprise when describing classroom speech acts (Thornborrow, in press). What appears clear from this classroom, though, is that the classroom discussion is essentially a conversation between the ESL teacher and the boys in her class: the teacher usually asks questions (79 occurrences) and these are usually answered by boys (57 responses). (Only eight responses are offered by girls.)

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The teacher also used much explanation and instruction in her talk, followed closely by negative or positive comments (negative responses: 31; positive: 24). Of her responses, most were directed to boys (24 times) over girls (9 times) or 2.5:1. Though negative comments were also directed to boys more often than to girls (5:1) so were the positive comments (3:1). The teacher offered praise four times: once to the whole class and three times to a boy; she never offered praise to a girl. Such discrepancy was also found in Mahony's study (2:1 questions directed to boys, 3:1 of praise) and also in Kelly (1988). Again, the actual percentages and ratios do not match the ratios in other studies. However, what appears consistent is that boys appear to receive more attention and more praise than girls do in similar speech moments.

The students' speech acts were usually responses to the teacher's questions. The boys in this ESL classroom were the usual and consistent responders. The boys were the ones to call out (21 such acts in boys to only 3 in girls, 7:1). Only two questions came from the students themselves—one boy and one girl. There was only one speech act that revealed a student sharing information and this was a boy's speech act.

An examination of the kinds of speech acts can account for the types of things said, further illuminating the linguistic environment in this ESL classroom. Girls rarely speak. The few times a girl does speak, she offers only phrasal comments, such as: "He planted apple-seeds" or "They call them apple-seeds" (Classroom Segment 1) while the boys' responses were often more substantial, such as: " and she climbed up all the tree, then she didn't say help, then she couldn't help the fire truck came then she came down" (Classroom Segment 1). Boys not only spoke more often, they said more substantial things when they did.

What is obvious in the transcripts is the very minor role the girls play in most of the lesson time. (This lack of linguistic space supports the similar findings of male domination of classroom talk in Stubbs, 1976, Coates, 1986, Graddol and Swann, 1989.) Many full-class discussions/lessons seem to regularly involve interactions of the teacher and her male students, with the girls generally appearing as observers of the classroom talk. (This over-concern for the contributions of boys is seen in the work of Mahony, 1985, Swann, 1992, and Stanworth, 1981). What is evident in this classroom is a general 9:1, sometimes even 10:1 ratio, of boys:girls use of the linguistic space. Is it the levels that are significant (something that may be accounted for by a poorly-trained teacher) or is the consistent discrepancy that appears in both non-ESL classrooms and ESL classrooms? The discrepancy can alert ESL teachers to gender as a major factor in language production: that boys will talk more.

At almost any point of the data, it is clear that the conversations are dominated primarily by the teacher and, secondarily, by the boys. What is particularly disarming are the proportions of such speech in this ESL classroom. In the first ten minutes of the data, a girl speaks only four times to the twenty-two contributions made by boys in the class. This imbalance is consistent throughout the ten months of observation. The disproportion of time allotted to the girls in this classroom does not shift as the year progresses; instead, the lack of linguistic space remains a constant.

Discussion

The analysis of both the use of linguistic space and the types of speech acts being produced in this ESL classroom revealed a complexity around the amount of talk. In an expanded view of

Hymes' (1972) "communicative competence," it was clear that the girls did not have, or did not take, complete freedom in the classroom to demonstrate her "communicative competence", despite an assumed developing fluency in English in their ESL classroom. Perhaps their silence was because of the particular ways the teacher limited speech production that the girls kept such low profiles. The girls rarely participated in full-class talk and they rarely joined in on the narratives of others in large part because of a fundamental lack of engagement with the teacher.

What is so disturbing, though, is not just the imbalance of boy:girl attention in this classroom, for much of what we might expect from other studies of gender in classrooms matches the discrepancy; it is that this ESL classroom is supposedly a language-learning classroom and yet one group within it is hardly speaking at all. Does this not alert ESL educators to the possibility that all the efforts that have gone into exploring gender in classrooms has perhaps forgotten a most obvious example of linguistic imbalance: language learning classrooms?

Ultimately, the results of this study show that a culturally-specific ESL classroom community, implicit with its shared values, did not interrupt the power gender played in the classroom experience. That some students are girls figured largely into the amount of speech. Such a discovery implicates ESL teacher training by suggesting that there has not been adequate emphasis placed on gender as a variable in language classrooms: femaleness is an important variable that may be a significant predictor of linguistic experience.

Of course, generalizations cannot be made based on one example of an ESL classroom; however, this study contributes to larger insights and the need for reflective classroom practice concerning

an ESL teacher's view of gender. Because gender may be a powerful linguistic predictor of language performance, this study demonstrated the connections and values which can exist in ESL settings. This study put forward compelling evidence that boys take up more linguistic space than girls: they talk more often and for greater lengths of time. The student contributions to dialogue can be somewhat explained by examining the teacher's speech acts; that is, the teacher engages with the contributions made by the boys. The kind of talk engaged in by the girls in this study, supports other studies that give evidence of gender in education as figuring prominently. Classrooms are "sites of struggle" (Walkerdine, 1990; 1997). What may be the struggle of ESL girls is the opportunity to speak at all. Such possibilities need to be considered by the ESL teacher.

Conclusion

This study provides fresh evidence of how gender is a prime variable in the ESL classroom. The particular lens of linguistic space does bring gender, to the fore of classroom practice. If debates of gender in the classroom are thought to be a thing of a 1970s past, one largely settled in other sociological debates, then this study suggests the debate is not over; in fact, it may be just beginning in the ESL field. The experiences of these young language learners suggest the battle for linguistic space is a powerful one. In fact, it may be that the voices of some ESL girls are under threat of being ignored in classroom lesson time. An ESL teacher can give attention to the amount of speech production of female students and give some attention to attitudes which might surround an ESL classroom and govern the use of linguistic space.

Learning happens through talk. It is, therefore, also crucial that some students (often boys) have opportunities to talk in classrooms, while others (often girls) claim disproportionate access to the linguistic space. It appears crucial that the ESL classroom and the ESL teacher be organized in such a way that gender is recognized as a significant variable of speech production. How this can be carried out is by no means simple because classroom day-to-day conversations are often spontaneous and appear intuitive and natural. To shift linguistic space so as to provide girls with more time to produce language will take more than an awareness on the part of ESL educators: it will take strategy.

Particularly when girls are in class discussions, teachers need to be aware of the extra pressures on female students, realizing that relationships are complex and that the linguistic space can be startlingly disproportioned. Giving attention to girls who are speaking and to what they are saying may go a long way in supporting ESL girls as speakers. Teachers waiting longer for girls to reply or specifically asking girls to participate in conversations may be helpful. Specific teacher practices may need to be taught in teacher education programs.

Finally it would appear appropriate for ESL teachers to structure talk related activities and to prepare girls for classroom discussions before they begin. It may be the case that teachers use talk as a preliminary activity yet often talk the entire lesson in an attempt to govern the learning. However, it needs to be recognized that speech itself can determine learning opportunities and if girls are quiet or are kept quiet, this silencing impedes their learning potential. ESL girls may be shy and quiet of their own accord but it is the systematic silencing of girls that may need further attention. Such research needs to continue if we are to address the processes at work in ESL

classrooms that may be limiting the potential of a group of students based on any variable. Who is talking? is a critical question for the ESL teacher. The stereotyping of Punjabi girls or other ESL girls as quiet is simply not a reasonable response to such enquiry.

This ESL classroom is, of course, just one particular case and is dependent on local understandings. But such local complexity can implicate all ESL classrooms, each filled with unique issues. What all ESL classrooms share with this one is the variable of gender and its potential to influence speech production. Such recognition of gender challenges accepted ways of thinking about primary ESL settings as benign or neutral. This study invites further examination of gender construction in the ESL classrooms. As the data shows, sometimes girls are not permitted linguistic space in classrooms. ESL teachers would do well to take measures to ensure that girls are also claiming and using a fair share of linguistic space.

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